

TALE AS OLD AS TIME

DISCOVERING THE HEART OF REMAKES THROUGH *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

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Once upon a time, in a world rampant with remakes and cash grabs, the question of value was added to the mix. How can you tell the difference between a valuable and a valueless remake? Based on the work of film critic Thomas Leitch, this article uses the main principles of *Beauty and the Beast* as a model to judge the invaluable and valueless remakes, while analyzing what qualifies as a remake. With case studies from 1946, 1991, and 2017, it concludes that valueless remakes can succeed at earning money, but that it takes an invaluable remake to be remembered.

Introduction:

Today, every film feels like a remake. Each year, Disney releases a live-action retelling of an animated classic, and a superhero movie repeats a story that we already saw last year and the year before that. *Dune* is doomed to be remade every few decades, while *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Walking Dead* are all getting their own spin-offs. In an era with endlessly new renditions of *Star Wars* and Batman, and unending retellings of classics such as *A Star Is Born*, *Little Women*, and *King Kong*, we have to ask why

studios spend so much time and energy drawing stories from the same dry well when they could surely find new sources of inspiration elsewhere.

Michael Eisner, CEO of Walt Disney Company from 1984 to 2005, put it this way, “The pursuit of making money is the only reason to make movies. We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective” (Stewart, 2005). That which has succeeded at the box office once is more likely to succeed again than an entirely

new product. Given their ready-made story structure, access to legal rights, and tried-and-true formulas tested on earlier audiences, remakes are a safe bet (Forrest, 2002). This is especially true since remakes can enrapture audiences who grew up with older versions of these stories and make them feel nostalgic for their childhoods. And the receipts are obvious (Taylor, 2021). Of the top twelve lifetime grosses at the worldwide box office as of Spring 2022, only three were not obvious remakes, sequels, or spin-offs (these being *Avatar*, *Titanic*, and *The Avengers*) (Box Office Mojo, 2022). As for Disney live-action remakes at the worldwide box offices, *Aladdin* (2019) made \$1.05 billion at worldwide box offices; *The Lion King* (2019) made \$1.66 billion; and *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) made \$1.26 billion.

However, financial success does not necessarily equate value. A film is only as valuable as its principles. These are the primary abstract ideas that a story is based on and relies on to succeed as a piece of artistry that makes a claim about the nature of humanity or the world. A movie with the principle of “crime does not pay” would have little value if it ended with crime suddenly paying at the end. Similarly, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* held to the principles that a black-and-white morality system is a feature of the past and should be replaced with nuanced

understandings of many shades of gray. At least, those were the principles of the first two thirds of the movie. The final third reversed this progress by reinstating a black-and-white system, making the movie seem convoluted and poorly structured. From political documentaries to summer blockbusters, no matter the production budget, a movie is all smoke and no fire if it has no principles that hold it up. Without principles, any movie is nothing more than random images flashing on a screen, devoid of consistent narrative or meaning.

As we will see through an in-depth case study, the relationships between the films *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) and its counterparts, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), demonstrate what gives a remake value and what a valueless remake looks like. While the 1991 classic demonstrates what a valuable remake looks like by honoring the principles of the 1946 original and expanding them for a modern audience, the 2017 remake proves to be only a(n expensively produced) cheap copy, replicating precise images at the expense of principles. Due to its adherence to 1946’s principles of an appreciation for core beauty and fantasy, 1991 demonstrates artistic creativity, while 2017 exemplifies the pitfalls of modern Hollywood.

Types of Remakes:

Thomas Leitch, the renowned film critic, recognizes four types of film remakes (Leitch, 2002). These will be helpful in comparing the relationships among the basic story of *La Belle et la Bête/Beauty and the Beast* and its three main iterations. The four types are as follows:

- The Readaptation, when the filmmaker goes to the original source text instead of the most recent film version. Here, the source text is *La Belle et la Bête* from 1946, which I will refer to as “The Original.”
- The Update, when the filmmaker takes an “overly revisionary stance toward an original [source], even though they transform it in some obvious way...adopting standards... that implicitly criticize the original as dated, outmoded, or irrelevant” (Leitch, 2002, 47). The story is updated to better relate to a modern audience, often subtracting outdated qualities and becoming the newest version.
- The Homage, when the filmmaker does not intend to remake the original story, but creates their film in tribute to one that came before.
- The True Remake, when the

filmmaker does not make changes to the original source besides making a more recent and improved version. This last category typically places the newer films in direct competition with their predecessors, with the intention of replacing the original.

To Leitch, the remake must follow through on two opposing claims. These are that the remake is just like the original and that the remake is better than the original. Achieving both of these conditions is critical for a remake to out-compete the original movie.

By these definitions, The Classic (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991) is an update of The Original (*La Belle et la Bête*, 1946) because it reworks even the basic plot elements to better reflect the current culture. Meanwhile, The Remake (*Beauty and the Beast*, 2017) attempts to be a true remake of its 1991 predecessor, with the intention of being the newer, better version of the same story and script. The 2017 Remake’s failure to be the better version of The Classic gives it the appearance of an homage to The Classic; however, using the same script with some additions is not the mark of a new piece paying tribute to an old one. Rather, The Remake is a new beast trying to take the palace of the old. The following text will examine the details of each version of *La Belle et*

la Bête/Beauty and the Beast to discover how The Original's principles do or do not carry over into subsequent versions of the story.

1946: The Original

Jean Cocteau, the director of The Original (*La Belle et la Bête*, 1946), chose to start his movie with a written message for his audience. The English translation is as follows:

Children believe what we tell them. They have complete faith in us. They believe that a rose plucked from a garden can plunge a family into conflict. They believe that the hands of a human beast will smoke when he slays a victim, and that this will cause the beast shame when a young maiden takes up residence in his home. They believe a thousand other simple things. I ask of you a little of this childlike simplicity, and, to bring us luck, let me speak four truly magic words, childhood's "Open Sesame": "Once upon a time..."

With that request, Cocteau begins his movie, filled with fantastical elements and a heavy supply of movie magic. After Belle's father attempts to take a rose from a magical garden as a gift for Belle, he is caught by the Beast, who lets him go under the condition that he sends one of his daughters to take his place. Belle, against her father's wishes, sneaks out of the house and takes

the place of her father at the mercy of a monstrous beast who lives in a castle filled with magical hallways, moving candelabras, and living statues. Although having a hideous exterior, Beast is kind inside. He progresses from originally wanting vengeance for his rose, to wanting marriage to Belle, to wanting the best for Belle at his own expense. Beast's foil (named Avenant, translating appropriately to Handsome) is beautiful on the outside, but a monster on the inside. This original foil could be considered the proto-Gaston when compared to the other films. He also desires to marry Belle, but becomes ever more forceful in his attempts to force Belle to marry him, unlike Beast. In the end, Belle admits her love to Beast, despite his ugly appearance, and he is transformed to look like Avenant, while the real Avenant dies at the hand of an animated statue and posthumously transforms into a beast.

As stated by The Original's opening message, the story relies on a child-like acceptance of magic that leads to fantastical enchantment and wonder. Gustave Doré inspired illustrations and Baroque imagery create the atmosphere of a fantasy story where magic is real. Magic is associated with only the realm of the Beast until Belle returns to the outside world with magical items. Every shot within the Beast's realm demonstrates that it is not limited to reality,

where riches can appear out of thin air and acts of violence are met with smoking hands. The fantasy element of accepting inexplicable magic is central for the events of the plot to occur. Instead of dwelling on the logic or rules of magic, The Original argues that we should enjoy stories and fairy tales with child-like faith and feel enchanted by their unexplainable elements.

Cocteau's opening message pertains to the movie magic seen on screen, but even more clearly relates to the Beast himself. As Cocteau's examples from the opening text are given, they dictate the plot of the story, up until it is revealed that Beast's true beauty lies in the core of his being. Most magical of all is not an enchanted mirror, but that a beast could actually be beautiful within, which no character besides Belle is able to see. After the Beast's transformation, he says, "I could only be saved by a loving look... Love can turn a man into a beast. But love can also make an ugly man handsome." This is said after the ugly Beast is discovered to be far more humane than the beautiful Avenant. After this, Avenant and Beast switch appearances such that Avenant's inner hideousness remakes him into a beast and the Beast's core beauty refashions him as a beautiful man. This principle of core beauty trumping outer beauty is exemplified by how the Beast learns to behave selflessly because of his

relationship with Belle and how Avenant, as the Beast's foil, begins to act with violence and hatred, revealing his core character.

Within The Original, Cocteau reveals two intrinsic principles of his story. The first is a suspension of disbelief and willingness to accept the fantastic. These principles enable the story to be told in the whimsical manner that Cocteau wants, allowing the unexplainable magic in the story to be enjoyed rather than criticized. The second principle, that genuine beauty is within, is the critical point of the ending. If core beauty did not matter in this story, the Beast would have always remained an ugly animal, and Avenant would have been the charming prince ready to slay him. However, the ending shows us a beautiful, human Beast and an ugly, ferocious Avenant, proving that this story and its ending rest on the importance of the core beauty of these characters.

These are the two principles that The Original depends on to form a cohesive narrative that makes a claim about the nature of humanity. Because Cocteau begins his film with asking the audience to accept magic, we are prepared to accept that the Beast and Avenant can switch appearances. This switch allows us to see that genuine beauty lies within. As a result, The Original does not just exist because of an

appreciation for core beauty and fantasy, but it is a story about these elements as well. Without these two principles shaping the story, The Original would not tell the story that we know today. This brings us to the film's successors, each shaped by history and with its own variations.

1991: The Classic

Between 1946 and 1991, technology sprang forward. The young industry of cinema had shifted from films that would only ever be seen in a theater to films that could be played and rewound at home on a VHS tape. Color film had replaced black and white, and Disney animation (the same that had produced the smash hit *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937) was a household name, known for its retellings of fairy tales in a family friendly, imaginatively colorized fashion.

To revisit Leitch's categories, The 1991 Classic could almost be argued to be an homage rather than an update, except that the overall storyline remains the same despite many changes. Most of all, these changes never take away from the principle of core beauty nor from the appreciation of fantasy. The same elements are updated for a new audience and even result in the spoken line "true beauty is found within," but the re-creation of the main story is too similar to The Original to be an homage. The Classic also

does not try to directly replace The Original as an identical copy that has been improved, but updates key elements for a younger audience in the late twentieth century. Consequently, The Classic is an update of The Original.

Beauty and the Beast (1991) significantly adds to the content of The Original, with some subtractions to story elements as well. Instead of copying The Original's stylized opening crawl of text, a narrator and stained-glass imagery tell the story of a selfish prince turning away a haggard stranger from his home. When this stranger reveals herself to be an enchantress, she curses him and tells him that "beauty is found within." Belle's life with her eccentric, inventive father and her own love for learning separate her from the town and mark her as inherently special. Her father is imprisoned by the Beast after he attempts to take shelter from a storm at the Beast's castle, and she takes the initiative to hunt down her father in the woods, locate the dungeon holding her father, and make an agreement with the Beast, despite her father's pleas to take her place instead. This change updates the premise of the story to the heroic actions of the protagonist rather than bad chances and a bargain between other characters. In other words, Belle has more agency in this story and sacrifices her freedom for her father's. As for additions, The Classic adds musical numbers

and magical characters who encourage the development of Belle and Beast's relationship so that it grows steadily and is not a mystical force of nature. Meanwhile, the Beast's foil is now Gaston, the popular hero of the town. Finally, the curse that Beast is under has a time limit and can only be broken by simultaneously being loved and loving another.

In addition, Belle and Beast are given more time together in *The Classic*, specifically getting to interact as equals. While *The Original* gave them screen time together, Beast's desire to marry Belle existed as soon as he saw her, but Belle did not care about the Beast romantically until the plot of the third act required her to do so. Their primary relationship was that of a captor and captive, with Belle refusing to marry the Beast no matter how many times he yelled at her or demanded her obedience. In contrast, *The Classic* takes the time to develop a relationship between Belle and the Beast, which eventually develops into romance rather than relying on sudden change of heart that allows the plot to continue. In fact, *The Classic* focuses on the relationship between Belle and Beast more than any other version and never becomes distracted by any other plot than the growth of their relationship. Beast, ill-tempered at first, has a kind heart and wants the best for Belle, leading him to actively learn to

control his temper, check his pride, and behave increasingly kindly to Belle.

Beast's foil is defined with crystal clarity, showing undoubtedly and heavily that outward appearances are not a reflection of core beauty. Avenant's replacement (Gaston) is given much more attention as a gorgeous, narcissistic brute of a man, and this screen time replaces a secondary plot of *The Original* about Belle's brother and the family's debt. Gaston's character is so over the top in his wicked heart and the adoration he receives from the town that his relationship with Belle is as important as her relationship with the Beast due to their obvious contrasts. While the town is enamored with Gaston's beauty and "charm" despite his primeval nature, Belle cares only about each character's core and is able to love the Beast despite his appearance. While Avenant's ending has him and the Beast switch appearances to make the within match the without, Gaston's follows his series of bold proclamations that assume Belle could never love a hideous monster and could only love someone like himself. However, all these proclamations come in the wake of Belle declaring, "[The Beast] is not the monster, Gaston, you are." In practically every second of Gaston's screen time, the direct contrast between core beauty within and without is personified. *The Classic* more than stays true

to the original concept of core beauty, but paints a starker contrast and more vibrant picture for a modern audience than *The Original* could.

As for fantasy in *The Classic*, the artistic style of animation allows for the fantasy castle and magic to be depicted the entire time as a fairy tale. While the castle no longer has ominous blowing curtains or moving doors, it is still whimsically fantastical with the castle servants being turned into living objects who care for the Beast and try to maintain the castle. These servants include, for example, a steaming teapot and her energetic child racing around on tea carts and living in a kitchen cupboard. One could say that the movie has realism issues since Belle accepts these magical characters without terror or confusion, but her lack of reaction simply reflects the appreciation of fantasy that Cocteau requested in *The Original*. This magic makes no logical sense, nor should it. The enchanted objects of the castle fly around in grandiose musical numbers all along a backdrop that is reminiscent of Gustave Doré and Baroque imagery, with a tightly wound Clock-Butler even making a cheeky pun about Baroque art. There is no question that *The Classic* updates the magic for its audience by replacing *The Original*'s magic (shot splicing and superimposition with moving candelabras) with colorful, animated musical numbers and candelabras that sing and dance. The

technological changes, as well as the audience's greater acceptance of fantasy through the medium of animation, allowed *The Classic* to once again do more than copy Cocteau's original's principle of fantasy, but surpass it for the modern audience. *The Classic* takes Cocteau's two self-identified principles of his film and embodies them further than even he could in the 1940s.

2017: The Remake

The Disney corporation became a juggernaut of the film industry, with many of its classic films from the 90s having gained multigenerational exposure and nostalgia. As the audience grew in age and the films grew in cultural relevance, cheap criticisms of Disney movies lacking realistic consequences and having plot holes became a common source of humor. Some common criticisms were that Belle was a victim of Stockholm syndrome, that the Beast was unjustly cursed at age eleven for not opening his door to a stranger, and that his servants should not have been cursed at all. In a series of business decisions that started after the 2000s, Disney decided to remake many of their, now classic, animated films in live-action, while addressing the plot holes and adding realism to their old films. These live-action remakes would be in direct competition with their earlier counterparts, with the remakes showing in theaters while the

originals were still part of pop culture and easily accessible for purchase. The remakes would repeat the same stories (often with the same exact scripts) while answering all of the plot holes and lack of realism.

The *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) remake draws directly from the script of The 1991 Classic rather than The 1946 Original, but with even more additions that tend to subtract from Cocteau's two main principles. For starters, The Remake adds live-action and CGI realism to replace the animation, even more musical numbers, and non-thematic and forced feminist and LGBTQIA+ representation. Increased representation is a common way to update films for modern audiences, but the execution of the idea matters. For example, the patriarchy of the town actively persecutes Belle for being a literate woman and punishes her for teaching a young child to read after declaring, "Teaching another girl to read; Isn't one enough?" before destroying her property. This film defines feminism by the persecution Belle experiences from a few bad, old men rather than by the values or actions of Belle herself. Likewise, the character of LeFou, Gaston's crony, is now a closeted gay man who continuously drops one liners about being attracted to Gaston, that Gaston (with comedic intent) does not pick up on. Because LeFou's

sexuality only exists as a punchline, his character is not meaningful or good gay representation. Neither the feminist nor gay representation of this film fits comfortably into the story, especially considering the ultra-realist approach that is taken to other elements of The Remake. Neither element is written to fit into the story, instead moving the viewer from the movie experience into self-awareness that they are watching a film.

Some of The Remake's other additions affect Cocteau's principle of the appreciation of fantasy because they try to address the supposed plot holes of The Classic with little success. For instance, this film claims that failure to lift the curse will result in all the magical characters losing their souls to the objects they have become, a process which is depicted as physically painful. This exposition also addresses why the servants deserved to be punished with the Beast in the curse and how a magical curse would work in real life when there are people who live around the castle. In addition, The Remake includes a time-traveling-portal book that reveals to Belle and the Beast that Belle's mother was not in The Classic because she was the victim of the plague in Paris two decades before. Although this addition does address the "plot hole" of Belle's missing mother, it takes away from the fantasy of the story and the child-like faith that viewers are supposed to bring

to it by explaining every questionable detail.

What *The Classic* did so well regarding core beauty was the well-developed relationship that was built between Belle and the Beast, showing the remorse he feels after every angry outburst, his self-sacrifice for Belle against a pack of wolves, and his desire to be more than a beast. Also, Belle's and the Beast's scenes together emphasize her taking on the role of teacher and bringing literacy to the castle. These scenes copy multiple interactions between Belle and Beast from *The Classic*, but replace one or the other with other magical characters acting as their intermediaries instead of giving Belle and the Beast shared screen time. The added length of the film and extra characters do not give Belle and the Beast more time together with greater personality dynamics, but steal even more time from the pair as useless dialogue and CGI objects continuously force Belle and the Beast into separate scenes from each other.

The extreme dimorphism that could be done in animation is limited to reality in *The Remake*. The animated Beast's emotionally expressive face and animalistic body language communicate his nuanced thoughts and feelings in every scene. Meanwhile, the CGI Beast is limited by what the actor's body can physically achieve and by what skills motion capture has

in trying to replicate a nuanced, emotional performance with realistic-appearing CGI. As a consequence, the idea of core beauty with clear examples of vile demigod versus monstrous beast is replaced by creepy mean guy versus creepy hairy guy, both of whom lack personality or a deeper relationship with Belle. The CGI impedes any depth of character, emotional expression from, or personal connection to the Beast and other CGI characters.

Furthermore, the perfect contrast of Gaston in *The 1991 Classic* is replaced in 2017 by an angry war veteran whom the town dislikes. This unpopular, angry man shares the name and general costume of Gaston from *The Classic*, and that is where the similarities end. Gaston turns from the perfect foil into a vestigial organ, existing in the movie without any contributions to the relationship between Belle and Beast, nor adding to the idea of core beauty. He is given additional screen time compared to *The Classic*, but for a new, secondary kidnapping plot that involves no lead characters and does not contribute to the larger story.

Where *The Remake* most obviously fails is in its appreciation of fantasy. While it tries to advance the use of technology with CGI and motion capture, it also fails to become more fanciful. In choosing live-action in place of

animation, Disney embraces ultra-realism, where every element of the story must look as realistic as possible. This thematic choice directly opposes the visual fantasy of The Original's magic and of The Classic's animated fantasy elements. At best, larger-than-life characters like Gaston and Lumiere become realistic, lackluster versions of themselves, while other characters like Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth enter the uncanny valley. Even the difference between a haunting animated castle and an ultra-realistic CGI castle leaves the most recent remake with greater realism at the expense of fantasy.

Moreover, the plot itself no longer has interest in unexplained fantasies. In direct response to many of the plot holes from The Classic, The Remake creates multiple secondary plots that do not contribute to the story, but answer random cartoonish aspects of The Classic. The Remake explains Belle's missing mother, gives more information about the enchantress, excuses the punishment of guilty bystanders, and addresses other minor details in various subplots, even though none of these new elements contribute to the larger story of Belle and Beast's relationship. Any questions of fantasy are quickly thrown out the door in the first second that the exact details of a magical curse's effect on the greater region of France are addressed.

Both visually and storywise, The Remake disregards an appreciation for fantasy and tries to replace it with ultra-realism. Sadly, both talking candlesticks and the plot of *Beauty and the Beast* rely on fantasy in order to succeed. The Remake had the challenge of being both the same as its predecessor and simultaneously better, but it failed at both. A film is only as valuable as its principles, and The Remake replaced the original principles of *Beauty and the Beast* with the principles of profit, replicating the *Beauty and the Beast* aesthetics alone.

Conclusion:

The 1991 Classic succeeds as a remake to The 1946 Original and charmed audiences, becoming a nostalgic piece of film that is still known widely today. Artistically, The Classic managed to remake The Original with a significant cultural update for its audience and surpassed The Original at what Cocteau had addressed as The Original's two primary principles. In contrast, The 2017 Remake has the challenge to replicate The Classic, while also trying to improve it. Its attempt results in an aesthetically cheap remake that misses key thematic elements due to its ultra-real visuals and focus on real-life consequences. This, combined with clumsy attempts at feminist and LGBTQIA+ representation, adds content that does not

contribute to the larger story and ultimately abandons the idea of accepting magic with child-like faith.

While this essay has investigated the core of what is *Beauty and the Beast* and the original director's own words as to the core of the story, such elements are obviously not what make or break a box office smash. The Remake is a poorly done knock off of a better telling of the same story (The Classic), but that artistic conclusion does nothing to prevent the success of The Remake.

While cheap remakes and sequels are ever the result of a box office success, immediate cash success and cultural relevance are different markers of success. Disney has attempted several times to profit from The Classic's popularity, but few of these attempts are remembered today. *Beauty And The Beast: The Enchanted Christmas* (1997), *Beauty And The Beast: Belle's Magical World* (1998), and *Beauty And The Beast The Broadway Musical* (1994) are all attempts to recreate the magic of The 1991 Classic, but none have made the same cultural impact or are remembered as well today. Similarly, when reminded of Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Cinderella*, most readers will first think of the originals (1955, 1967, and 1950 respectively) before remembering any details of their live-action remakes (2019, 2016, 2015 respectively). We remember The 1991

Classic *Beauty and the Beast* before thinking of any of its following sequel stories from the same decade, as is the same case for Disney's *Cinderella II* (2002), *Lady and the Tramp 2* (2001), and *The Jungle Book 2* (2003). Remakes and sequels can be made for quick profits, but the artistic masterpiece is what is remembered.

This is where Cocteau has his own foil in the personality that is Disney CEO Michael Eisner. Eisner stated that movie making has no obligation to make art nor history, despite the creation of a masterpiece right under his nose. The 1991 Classic, made during Michael Eisner's time at Disney, is a truly valuable remake despite his insistence that artistry is not necessary to make money. Art can still be created despite an environment whose sole intent is of money making. Cocteau's insistence on the principles within his art gave it quality, while a remake that focuses only on profit is a hit (1991) or miss (1997, 1998, 2017) depending on whether these artists decide to copy Cocteau's sentiments and emphasize principles and artistry. In the end, it is the artistic value that determines the value of a remake.

Beauty and the Beast's core has been a story of inner beauty and fantastical magic since The 1946 Original, and adhering to these principles made The 1991 Classic a film worth

remembering. A valuable remake or sequel is one that maintains the principles of the original, perhaps even communicating those principles more clearly than the original did. At the end of the day, cash-grabbing sequels and remakes can still fill seats, but only stories with true artistry and principles will be remembered.

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